

THE BALLAD POETRY OF ENGLAND.

BY HENRY W. HERBERT.

THERE is, perhaps, no branch of English literature with which American readers have in general so little familiarity as the beautiful and simple ballads which, from a very remote period, have been the most popular, as they are certainly the most national, of all English poetry.

The ballad is not, it is true, peculiar to the British isles, nor, indeed, to any age or country; for, not to enter into the grave and learned questions—too grave and learned for pages such as these—whether the immortal *Iliad* is itself other than a connected tissue of grand ballads, orally handed down from age to age, of hero-kings, and at the last compiled by some rhapsodist, to whom, unknown although he be, posterity owes deathless gratitude—whether the theory of Niebuhr is correct, and Livy's "pictured page" no more than a prose poem, made up of old Latin and Etruscan lays or ballads, for the difference is in name alone—not, I say, to enter on these vexed and stormy questions, we can find proof sufficient of the extreme antiquity of ballad poetry in the wild lays of the Runic scalds, in the *Nibelungen lied*, in the songs of the Druids, to which it is pretty well ascertained that the old "Derry down" chorus, so well known to ballad readers, belonged, and lastly, in those singular productions, the *στίχαι πολιτικοί* of the Byzantine historians, which are not only in spirit, tone and character, purely historic ballads, but are actually couched in accentual metre, with no reference to syllabic quantity, as usual in Greek verse, of the same cadence as the vulgar "Oh, Miss Bailey." Still, though not peculiar to the British isles, I have no hesitation in styling them the most national; in the first place, as having been, from the most distant period to the present day, the most widely popular among the most strictly national—that is to say, the lower orders of those islands; secondly, as embodying most strikingly the leading traits of national character, as preserving most faithfully the modes of national thought, feeling, passion—nay, even of national costume and expression; and, lastly, as having, in those islands, attained a degree of finish, grace and sweetness, coupled to absolute simplicity, which they have not reached in any other land—not even in Spain, the fire and spirit of whose popular chaunts, familiarized to English ears by the truthful and soul-stirring translations of Lockhart, can scarcely be too highly lauded.

It is comparatively but within a few years, even in England, that any efforts have been made to collect or preserve these exquisite specimens of natural and untaught minstrelsy.

From the restoration, as it was called—pollution and debasement it might better have been termed—of English literature under the third of the unhappy Stuarts, during the whole polished but, with a few exceptions, effete and emasculated school of Anne and the elder Georges—a school which was founded entirely on French and Latin, to the total exclusion of English models—until the late revival of true taste in the present century, it was the fashion to look with the utmost scorn and loathing on any thing that savoured of nature, truth or simplicity. And, accordingly, we find that Doctor Johnson, who, so far as style, taste and language are concerned, is no more an English writer than Cicero or Pliny, poured out the phials of his thunderous indignation, as might have been expected, upon the first collectors of these, alas! too few and mangled relics of old English song.

The truth is, that the writers of those ages were, almost to a man, courtiers, living in purlieus of a large city, utterly ignorant of nature or of man, except the man of courts and saloons, persons to whom the country was a terra incognita, and its most ordinary productions utterly unknown. Thus we find that the pastorals of Pope are no more English—descriptions, I mean, of English scenery, or illustrative of English habits, than the eclogues of Virgil, from which they are, indeed, closely copied; and that those of Shenstone, Tickell and others of that day, are yet worse—bald and puerile imitations of that most puerile of all schools, the French Arcadian Pastoral, with its Colins and Strephons in bag wigs and court dresses, its Dorises and Delias in powder, paint and patches.

What wonder, then, that to such men as these, strains such as that—"The Hunter of Cheviot"—of which the most refined and accomplished scholar, the friend and patron of Spenser, himself a poet and a rare one, Sir Philip Sidney exclaimed—"I never heard the old song of Percey and Douglas that I found not my heart moved more than with a trumpet, and yet it is sung but by some blind crowder, with no rougher voice than rude style,"—what wonder then, I say, that such strains as these should appear to such men and their followers, who tricked out their weak verse

"With meretricious gauds of foreign song,"

uncivil, barbarous, unpolished, rugged and unworthy a place even in that temple of British poetry, of which, indeed, they form the base, grand in the beautiful simplicity of Saxon quaintness.

I may be wrong, but I would not give the bold and fiery Saxon strength of "The Percy of North-

underland," "Sir Patrick Spens," or "Kinmont Willie," for all the rounded periods and Latinized bombast of the great depreciator of Shakspeare; nor the genuine Saxon pathos and simplicity of "Bartholomew's Dirge," "The Douglas Tragedy," "Fair Helen of Kirconnel," or "Jellon Grame," for all French *clinquant*, exquisitely polished as it be, of the Rape of the Lock, or the Essay on Man.

It is to Sir Walter Scott that we owe the great and complete disinterment from the dust of ages of these long unappreciated relics; and it is probably to these neglected relics that the world owes Sir Walter Scott, whose first essay in authorship was "Glenfinlas," an imitation of an old ballad, published in conjunction with some ineffable trash by that strangely overrated genius Matthew, better known as Monk Lewis.

To these reflections and the perpetration of this paper, I have been led in the hope of calling, by my humble words, the attention, it may be, of a few readers to this all unappreciated "well of English undefiled," by the sight of two exquisite English volumes, entitled "The Book of British Ballads," edited by S. C. Hall, and embellished with the most spirited and beautiful illustrations in wood that have appeared in any English publication, with the exception of Lockhart's Spanish Ballads.

The volumes are, indeed, truly beautiful, and it cannot but be a source of gratification to all true lovers of poetry and the arts, that, instead of the miserable, trashy annuals, filled up with the mock heroics of titled drivellers and the mock sentiment of right honourable misses, the pencil and graver are called to lend their aid to the classics of English literature. How can it be considered a slight benefit to the taste of the age, if, through the medium of books like that before us, the eyes of the rising generation can be diverted from the wishy-washy effusions of modern poetasters and infinitesimal poetesses to the pure Saxon English of those old hearty days, when people were not ashamed to call things by their proper names, and were not one whit less modest for doing so than we emasculators of our good English tongue in the nineteenth century—of those good days, when men wrote and spoke even as they thought and acted, strongly?

With the plan, then, and the execution, as far as embellishment goes, of Mr. Hall's Book of Ballads, no fault can be found. It is, however, to be lamented, that he has left out many of the beautiful and striking genuine old ballads, in order to make room for modern imitations of less than questionable merit; that even of the few ancient ballads, comparatively speaking, that he has introduced, those chosen are not, with two or three brilliant exceptions, the most spirited or the most pathetic; and that of the modern imitations he has been singularly unfortunate in his selections.

In the first volume, we have first in place as to merit, among the historical ballads, "Chevy Chase," and next to it, the popular and lovely, be-

cause all truth and nature, and most pathetic tale, though told in the plainest and most unadorned language, of "The Children in the Wood," with its catastrophe, over which how well do I remember weeping, in those bright days of childhood when no real anguish had called forth tears that torture as they flow—

"Thus wandered these two pretty babes,
Till death did end their grief;
In one another's arms they died
As babes wanting relief.

"No burial these pretty babes
Of any man receives,
Till robin red-breast painfully
Did cover them with leaves."

For which kind deed, I believe, credited fully by the simple country people, far more than for his domestic habits or implicit confidence in his friend man, the English robin red-breast is revered almost as a household god, so that the rudest boor, the most thoughtless school-boy, would not, for very shame, dare to harm one feather of the cottager's familiar.

"Fair Rosamond," which succeeds the Children of the Wood, is well enough as a simple and sad narration of a tragical event; but there are in it none of those beautiful chance thoughts, those gems of natural pathos, belonging, as it would seem, to a far higher school of poetry than the rude ballad; those touches of nature which make the whole world kin—that are to be found so often, like pearls at random strewn, among many of the older ballads. "The Demon Lover" cannot, in the like manner, be objected to; and as a specimen of the hideous and fantastic of this school, it was, perhaps, well to introduce it. The same observation might be made with regard to "Kempion," except that it is too similar in its character to make it necessary as a specimen, when it has nothing of intrinsic merit comparable to hundreds which have been most judiciously omitted.

"The Nut-brown Maid," which follows the "Demon Lover," is one of the most exquisite—if not the most exquisite ballad in the language, though I am inclined to give the palm of excellence to "Fair Helen." What, in simplicity or sweetness, can excel the following lines—her reply to her lover's declaration of his misery and the causes of his outlawed state. To me it appears unrivaled in the whole circle of our language.

"Oh Lord, what is this world's bliss,
That changeth as the moon?
My summer's day in lusty May
Is darked before the noon.

"I hear you say, farewell. Nay—nay!
We depart not so soon?
Why say ye so? Whither will ye go?
Alas! what have ye done?

"All my welfare to sorrow and care
Should change if ye were gone.
For in my mind, of all mankind,
I love but you alone."

It, of course, needs not to be said that, in a compilation of the nature of that before us, with its rivulet of beautiful type meandering, as some one has said, through a wide plain of margin, it were useless to expect a majority of the surviving ballads which have been collected with so much care and learning by Bishop Percy, Mr. Ritson, Sir Walter Scott, Mr. Motherwell and others; but there was reason to expect that the best specimens of the various styles would have been selected, which appears by no means to be the case.

Indeed, it cannot but strike the reader, in spite of his deprecatory notes, that Mr. Hall has preferred those ballads which have been emendated and remodeled by modern writers to the grand, though at times uncouth simplicity of those which have undergone no such purifying process; and it is scarcely to be regretted less that he has made up so large a portion of his volumes of modern ballads of inferior merit, and of some things which are neither ballads nor English, as in one instance he admits, at all. It is to this strange preference only that we can ascribe his admitting "The Birth of St. George," a very bald and uninteresting piece, into his collection at all, a piece which Bishop Percy admits to be in great part modern, and which is in no respect comparable to numbers of those entirely omitted.

To the same hallucination only can be attributed his adopting the modernized ballad, styled "The Child of Elle," to the exquisite "Douglas Tragedy," of which it is evidently a varicd form, garbled and filled out to its present proportions by a modern hand. It is still, indeed, a beautiful poem; but to show our readers the great superiority of the old song, the inexplicable charm belonging to the ruder and less polished version, we shall make no apology for taking from the "Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border," the Douglas tragedy entire, well satisfied that its simple pathos will prove our best excuse.

THE DOUGLAS TRAGEDY.

"Rise up, rise up, now Lord Douglas," she said,
 "And put on your armour so bright;
 Let it never be said that a daughter of thine
 Was unmarried to a lord under night."

"Rise up, rise up, my own bold sons,
 And put on your armour so bright,
 And take better care of your younger sister,
 For your eldest's awa' the night."

He's mounted her on a milk-white steed,
 And himself on a dapple gray,
 With a bugelet horn hung down by his side,
 And lightly they rade away.

Lord William lookit o'er his left shoulder
 To see what he could see,
 And there he spy'd her seven brethren bold
 Come riding o'er the lea.

"Light down, light down, Lady Margret," he said,
 "And hold my steed in your hand,

Until that against our seven brethren bold,
 And your father, I make a stand."

She held his steed in her milk-white hand,
 And never shed one tear,
 Until that she saw her seven brethren fa',
 And her father, hard fighting, who loved her so dear.

"Oh! hold your hand, Lord William," she said,
 "For your strokes they are wondrous sair;
 True lovers I can get many a ane
 But a father I can never get mair."

Oh, she's ta'en out her handkerchief,
 It was o' the Holland sae fine,
 And aye she dightet her father's bloody wounds,
 That were redder than the wine.

"Oh chuse, oh chuse, Lady Margret," he said,
 "Oh whether will ye gang or bide?"
 "I'll gang, I'll gang, Lord William," she said,
 "For you have left me no other guide."

He's lifted her on a milk-white steed,
 And himself on a dapple gray,
 With a buglet horn hung down by his side,
 And slowly they baith rade away.

Oh they rade on, and on they rade,
 And a' by the light of the moon,
 Until they came to yon wan water,
 And there they lighted down.

They lighted down to take a drink
 Of the spring that ran so clear,
 And down the stream ran his gude heart's blood,
 And sair she gae to fear.

"Hold up, hold up, Lord William," she says,
 "For I fear that you are sluin."
 "'Tis naething but the shadow of my scarlet clonk
 That shines in the water sae plain."

Oh, they rade on, and on they rade,
 And a' by the light of the moon,
 Until they came to his mother's ha' door,
 And there they lighted down.

"Get up, get up, lady mother," he says,
 "Get up and let me in;
 Get up, get up, lady mother," he says,
 "For this night my fair lady I've win."

"Oh, make my bed, lady mother," he says,
 "Oh, make it broad and deep,
 And lay Lady Margret cloze at my back,
 And the sounder I will sleep."

Lord William was dead lang ere midnight,
 Lady Margret lang ere day,
 And all true lovers that go thegither,
 May they have more luck than they.

Lord William was buried in Marie's kirk,
 Lady Margret in Marie's quire:
 Out o' the lady's grave grew a bonny red rose,
 And out of the knight's a briar.

And they twa met, and they twa plat,
 And fain they wad be near,
 And a' the warld might ken right well
 That they were lovers dear.

But bye and rade the black Douglas,
And vow but he was rough,
For he pulled up the bonny briar,
And flang it in St. Marie's loch.

To those who are insensible to the quiet beauty of this simple narrative, it can hardly be hoped that the enthusiastic admirations of souls more attuned to the harmonies of nature can be understood, or that such gems as "Barthram's Dirge," "Fair Helen," "Jellon Grame," "The Bonnie Mill-dams o' Binnorie," "Lady Anne," "Lady Bothwell's Lament," and a thousand others, can be appreciated. Nevertheless, did our limits allow it, we would set before these some of the shorter of our favourites, and, at the same time, would have pointed out the sources of their quiet strength and pathos, and showed the cause of the vast inferiority of almost all modern imitations—which may be, however, stated almost in a word—the introduction of ornamental lines and epithets not directly necessary to the sense, which is a practice totally at variance with the habit of the old ballad minstrels, though almost universal with their copyists of modern days.

Of all the modern imitators, there are but three

ballads which will bear the test and compare with the severe yet touching quaintness of their models: Scott's "Eve of St. John," and Leyden's "Cout of Keeldar," both of which are omitted, and inferior works by the same authors inserted in this collection, and, by all consent, the most beautiful and correct of all, "Auld Robin Gray," by the accomplished Lady Ann Lindesay, which passed for a long time as a genuine ancient ballad.

At some future time, the favour of our readers may encourage the resumption of this subject, on which volumes might be written with greater care and more effect than pages. At present, it only remains to be added, that an American edition of this Book of British Ballads may be shortly expected to appear in this city, and that, *faute de mieux*, it deserves encouragement, and will, it may be expected, tend to the formation of a purer and severer taste than exists at present among our reading world. If this slight notice lead in any wise to the same good result, the author will deem himself fortunate, indeed; if not, the labour is, at least, one of love, and, as such, cannot be said to be wholly wasted.